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ABSTRACT

Communications is critical to community development, especially rural communities that are poor, immobile and at a distance from a major metropolitan area. The isolation of these communities comes out of a need for cohesiveness within a system that functions for them. There is some mutual support between their economic, political, and social system. The government needs to make exceptions, to give special considerations, to do for the poor in a way that fits their survival system. Therefore, a proper diagnosis of community is essential to proper formulation of policies and appropriation and further development of technology and content. Because communications is such a fundamental approach to human and societal growth, it is critical that citizens of a given area have access to new technology and exert influence over the content and style projected through the medium. Innovative educational programs could develop out of rural communities with access to communication facilitating devices if cultural realities were used to influence form and content. Hence in the development of communications technology it is important to have the technical and financial competency to deliver the good to such communities so that they might use communications as the prime mover toward fulfilling their definition of development. (NQ)

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U.S. Congress

Office of
Technology Assessment

Conference on

Communications and Rural America

November 15, 16, and 17, 1976

Washington, D. C.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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RC009678

Communications and Rural America

Purpose

In April 1976, the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) of the U.S. Congress issued a staff report entitled *The Feasibility and Value of Broadband Communications in Rural Areas.* The purpose of the conference is to extend this effort by:

- Considering a broader range of communications technologies which might be used to meet rural needs.
- Further examining the question of whether system demonstrations aimed at achieving economic viability are needed and if so, identifying the kinds of demonstrations which might be undertaken.
- Further examining whether rural interests have been adequately considered in existing Federal communications policy.

The outcome of this effort will be a report incorporating the information and points of view presented at the conference.

Congressional Interest

The conference is being held in response to a request for additional information on rural communications from Senator Herman Talmadge, Chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, as approved by the 12 member Technology Assessment Board of the U.S. Congress. Senator Pastore of the Senate Subcommittee on Communications subsequently joined Senator Talmadge in support of the conference. It is intended that the conference will be of value to the U.S. Congress in its deliberations on communications policy.

Conference Dates and Organization

The conference will convene for 3 days, November 15–17, 1976, with about 60 invited participants. For the first 2 days, participants will be equally divided among three panels which will meet in parallel. Each panel will concentrate upon a specific topic addressed in the OTA report as follows:

- Panel 1. Rural Development and Communications.
- Panel 2. Technology, Economics, and Services.
- Panel 3. Federal Policy.

On the third day, participants from all three panels will meet together to exchange and synthesize findings and explicitly address the question of rural system demonstrations.

Cosponsoring Institutions

The National Rural Center is cosponsoring Panel 1 (Rural Development and Communications). The Aspen Institute is cosponsoring Panel 3 (Federal Policy).

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RURAL DEVELOPMENT:
POSSIBILITIES FOR THOSE AREAS OF OUR COUNTRY THAT ARE CHRONICALLY POOR

For a Conference Scheduled by the Office of Technology Assessment of the U.S. Congress Held in Washington, D.C. - Nov. 15-17, 1976

By Marie Cirillo
Clairfield, Tennessee

Community Development: Similar Struggle as Telecommunications

Having been identified as one who can offer some expertise on a panel concerned about Rural Development and Communication, I offer the following out of my expertise as a Community Developer. Much like the stage of development with broadband communication, the role of the community developer has not been established in any well defined or established way. This is partly do to some fuzziness about what a community developer could do in a community, but more importantly it is due to the lack of any mechanism to financially support community developers. Hence, I consider it part of my job as a community developer to define community, to define the role of developer within community, to encourage churches, foundations and government to appropriate monies for community developers and finally to get schools of higher learning to initiate courses in community development. This process is similar to what we are dealing with in the development of telecommunications. With communications, there is technological invention and natural science at work. With community development, there is human invention and present day social realities at work. Next steps, such as institutional form, financial mechanism, legalities and content follow along similar patterns.

Access to Communications Central to Developments

Communications is critical to community development by whatever definition you give to community or to development. Up until last year, all of my official telephone communications were conducted over the Southern Bell eight party telephone system. There were many times during my half-hour and hour waits for somebody to get off the phone that I had an opportunity to reflect upon the inequities toward rural

people in our developed American society. In a quiet, modest Appalachian style, with a great deal of prodding from a young lawyer, several community organizations took their complaint to the Public Service Commission. The eventual success, which brought one and two party lines, also brought an additional cost which made telephones even less available to families in the community. Now my reflective moments are spent wondering if the change was, in fact, a positive development for this particular community, with its 30% unemployment and the majority population either very old or very young.

Value of Communications Technology to the Community Developer

The facts upon which a community developer judges the worth of a communications system are probably quite different than those of the financial, technical or policy-forming expert. The role of the community developer, as I define it, is to be concerned first and foremost by developments that promote cohesiveness within a particular community. This is a cohesiveness that comes about through a balanced interrelationship between functioning (not mythical) financial, political and social institutions of that community. Everything changes when the community is one of chronic poverty. Its sub-structure functions to meet their survival needs. It is one alien to the predominant socio-political-economic system operative within mainstream U.S.A. Rural communities that are mobile, affluent and within reasonable proximity to urban centers and not dominated by a strong ethnic culture, play their tune in a major key. Accessibility makes it possible to participate in the majority society, and community cohesiveness flowers naturally within the context of a national cohesiveness. Rural communities that are poor, immobile and at a distance from a major metropolitan area play in a minor key. Their isolation comes out of a need for cohesiveness within a system that functions for them. There is some mutual support between their economic, political and social system.

Particular Perspective of the Rural Poor

Since all my experience has been with a poor rural minority, and since they are a significant part of the rural population, I will address my concerns about the development of telecommunications as it holds some potential for these people. Much of what I say will be applicable to all rural communities, but poverty communities with their unique prob-

lems have unique possibilities. Along with that comes justification for government to make exceptions, to give special considerations, to do for the poor in a way that fits their survival system. A proper diagnosis of community is obviously essential to proper formulation of policies and appropriation and further development of technology and content. Perhaps we do need a special rural department at the national level. Perhaps exceptions for poor rural communities could better be made from within a framework of rural policy and budget than from urban oriented domination that presently exists. Perhaps some of our programs for underdeveloped nations would be more appropriate for areas in our country conspicuous for its rural poverty.

Minority Sub-Systems

Divesting oneself of the majority viewpoint about what is going on in rural/urban living patterns; what is economically feasible and technically most perfect; what is acceptable content and form is difficult when that is the world in which one lives. Minorities don't often have monies to do research, so when their viewpoint is expressed they have no defense when challenged. Yet the need for responsible dialogue and serious commitment to an exchange between rural/urban-minority/majority views is more imminent as cleavages emerge and moods of unrest are felt.

There is nothing more amazing to people who are close enough to see it than the genius of survival that is found in the poverty stricken rural communities of Appalachia, the deep South and the Southwest. Being stripped of almost everything that America considers essential, the poor community, within its own society, has built a sub-system which includes economic, political and social fibers that hold their society together. How very different a technology and economy we would have developed had communications systems grown out of this sort of experience.

I don't suppose there is anyone who would deny the fact that America is an urban industrial nation; that we have built an economic substrata filtering into every activity; that are politics and social institutions are urban. Trends toward consolidation in rural areas move so comfortably into place because of an economic system that works better as things get bigger. The predominant system is set up to function technically, economically, mechanically on a large

population base. We have seen time and time again how it is easier to move the people in order to keep the system working than it is to adjust the system to fit the people whose world happens to be based on concepts of smallness.

Some seven years ago my involvement in a network of unincorporated communities in East Tennessee brought me to an appreciation for the role of the half inch video portapak as a tool to development. Its accessibility, flexibility, simplicity, ease of operating and usefulness as a communications tool had unlimited potential for community growth. The more I began to see and feel what the video tape was doing for this community, the more I was driven to pursue better ways of transmitting this material. Once more I was faced with the reality of an economically developed technological invention that was accessible only if it was profitable, and that was dependent on the same kind of minimum population as telephone, water, clinic, etc. One's only chance for getting a piece of the good life is for your community to grow.

Questions about human rights and a system based on an economy that denies certain people access to that kind of human right continually, challenges that part of America that is small. Why can't the basic cost of telephone service in a rural area be the same as that in the neighboring urban towns? Why can't the cost of cable be equalized? Why can't we generate local programs over the air if we can't afford cable? What is there in technology that is denied birth on the American scene because it doesn't fit into the scheme of mainstream American growth economy? From my perspective as a community developer, access to communications is a thousand times more important than access to transportation. Government has always subsidized transportation. We need to question seriously its potential for making communications technology available to all.

Minority Point of View

From the viewpoint of the rural minority poor, I find some essential considerations lacking in most literature about the future of broadband communications. Where, for instance,in reports about migration, does one find any reference made to the return of the poor from urban ghettos to rural areas? The trend between the 40's and 60's which

caused the poor to run to the cities because they had no access to the means of production in the South and were offered jobs in the North, contributed to what is now identified as the greatest migration from rural to urban in the history of known civilization. How do I know that the community I live in is not typical of both what is going on in the 50's and what is going on now? The population of Clairfield dropped from 12,000 to 1,200 between 1940 and 1960. The 1,200 survived as a sub-culture based on their own systems and associations. In the past five years we have experienced a 30% increase in population. The young are no longer running to the cities. Word has gotten out that the opportunities are not really there any more. The 20-30 year olds are returning as they get laid off from their jobs. Some 40 year olds started coming home a few years ago knowing they had more skills and hopeful they could use them back home. They felt that life was too short to spend it all up in some city slum where one was miserable. A very few have returned to retire. Clairfield is not the place one would retire to unless family ties were stronger than any other consideration in life. So my question is what about that trend? How is communications technology going to fit into the lives of these people?

It is suggested in the study THE FEASIBILITY AND VALUE OF BROADBAND COMMUNICATIONS IN RURAL AREAS that people are moving from urban to rural areas and that more people might continue this trend if they see how they can live in the country and get all the advantages of the city. Perhaps the trend is saying that people are trying to get away from the way things function in the urban setting. If so there is not only a shift in place, but a shift in mentality as well. Are we trying that out for size? We need to, for if that is so the implications of the move is much more dramatic and eventually will bear on our underlying economic philosophy of bigness being better. The questions that arise are very serious ones. Do we system to fit a growing minority? Do we change the system and reorganize urban as well as rural systems? Do we try to use technology to bring to rural people those services given to urban centers, or do we use technology to bring in new services? If there is a rural culture

vs. an urban culture, do we do programming in culturally acceptable ways? If technology allows for communicating in a smaller sphere, to a more personal audience, what is the extent of the audience? what is the dimension of the information, entertainment, service, etc.?

Let me be a little more specific. If rural people operate at a slower pace, if the times-in-between are reflective rather than active moments, how do communications reflect this? If people are attracted to rural areas because of a growing desire for the outdoors, how does communications go outdoors, or become supportive of personal desires for outdoor activities? If part of the attraction to rural life is a human instinct to be drawn together with those sources upon which life depends, how can communications direct itself to this present need within society? If there are growing antipathies between rural/urban, professional/folk, haves/havenots, teacher/student, labor/management, how can communication be used for greater appreciation, mutual respect, or the promotion of the basic rights for the other?

Potential of Real Innovation

One useful example of a community that couldn't make it, but could have perhaps made it better another way, is that of the White Oak clinic.

In the Model Valley community where I work, we have had several primary health care centers open over the past ten years. Community people were primary initiators, and they organized to become the funding agency through which professionals were hired. Included in some of our wilder dreams was talk about two way cable, hooking a nurse up with specialists at the University hospital. That never came off, and we still don't know if such a set up would have provided better service at a price we could have afforded. As it happened, two of the four clinics had to close for inability to keep up with the high costs of medicine. In the meantime I got very involved in third party reimbursements, national health insurance and other such financial mechanisms necessary to maintain a health delivery service in the community. Many people, both local, professional, managerial and governmental talk about the need for health education and other preventive health services as well as the great need for environmental health programs. Yet in speaking

about national health insurance, people are afraid to introduce these concepts because they will add to the cost. Eventhough many people are convinced such expenditures would save us in the long run, we are not comfortable with adding new dimensions to the stereotype we have of health services and the cost of health care. Then I think of what one of our clinics could have done in both the preventative and environmental fields of health care with a black and white portapak and over the air transmission. Local people, with some paid consultants and others from established agencies, could have developed programs to explain the problems created by unsafe drinking water that exists in 85% of the homes. Television could bring information about Farmers Home grants to the elderly for home repair so that faulty wiring, unsafe stoves and broken porches could be repaired. Common ailments could be talked about. Doctors could suggest ordinary ways to prevent and cure them. Herbs, which are useful and obtainable by going out into the woods, could be explained. We could have something going on in our community that would very much respond to the people's desire for health care. We could afford it and therefore we could do it, without a massive flow of outsiders or government monies into the community. The activity could easily integrate into our real world that is rural-Appalachian-poor. I am convinced that if we had a few years leeway to do such a thing, there would come a time when someone would discover us and believe that we were the most creative, innovative thing going on in the field of rural health delivery.

Community Control

Because communications is such a fundamental approach to human and societal growth, it is critical that citizens of a given area have access to new technology and exert influence over the content and style projected through the medium. It is important therefore, that leaders recognize the capabilities that exist within community. Many more poor, for instance, have a highly developed capacity to be creative in the practical everyday activities of life. They have to constantly figure out how to make do with nothing. There have been innumerable times in my life when something has broken down at home and my instinctive response has been a feeling of distress, that I now have to make a trip to town to buy a part. Whenever I am fortunate enough to have one of my neighbors around at such a moment,

more often than not, they are able to find something to improvise and fix the broken part. In my pursuits of technical advice about the cost of cable in the community, I was given a price that eliminated the possibility of having cable. Local people in neighboring communities tell me that there are other ways it can be done. They tell me to notice the do-it-yourself way it has been done in certain communities. They smile and say "Now Marie, you know that community couldn't afford to run cable at the price you were given, but if there's a way we figure it out." I am confident that any real solution will come only if people at the local level are involved. The development of broadband communication must have, as a critical component, citizen involvement.

An Example

A rural community should have acceptable equipment for recording and transmitting real local news. That would be something quite different from what is now called local news but is really news about the nearest big city, which in this day and age is the only place that is acceptable to the technology, the laws and economics of television. Our community did a sample 15 minute news program with 1/2 inch video tape to dramatize the point. For purposes of comparative analysis a 15 minute newscast from Knoxville was recorded on the same tape.

Model Valley consists of about 12 unincorporated mountain communities located 70 miles north of Knoxville. Other than myself going to the Knoxville airport occasionally, Knoxville means nothing to the Model Valley residents other than a place to be hospitalized or the place that Billy Graham goes to speak. Issues in the two broadcasts were fundamentally the same, but the specifics were quite different. The dialects were quite different, the visuals very different, the tempo and the appeal different, the difference astounding. The tape is available upon request.

Another Example

Innovative educational programs could develop out of rural communities with access to communication facilitating devices if cultural realities were used to influence form and content. For example, the rural poor have a keen awareness of their dependence on primary sources necessary to life's sustainment. They need food, shelter, water, heat, clothing, family love and care, pleasure space and human interaction. Urban people need these things too, but they get them to a greater degree by paying

for them. Water, heat, housing and food go through many hands before they are delivered to the city dweller at a price. The urban person can achieve some space and some pleasure free, and some by paying for it - not so the rural poor. They only have what is free. Quite often human interaction only happens in an urban setting when special situations are set up to provide some protection from the masses in order for meaningful exchange to occur. Often one pays for this. Family love and care is expressed in economic and non-economic ways. But again, one who has purchasing power can choose to express love through a purchased gift. Gift giving is valid, important and universally practiced, but the poor have to put greater emphasis on other ways of expressing love and care within family. These and many other insights into culture, if given the chance could unconsciously influence the kind of educational and informative programs developed on audio-visual equipment. Once more, the need to set up a system accessible to the small community is key to such needed community participation. An inevitable side benefit from such localized programs would be the likelihood that such programs would be used in other places as part of an educational series on cross-cultural experiences in the United States.

What Has Been Done in Model Valley

Because my activities are funded through the resources of church, my $6,000 operating budget has been constant over the past nine years. My only directive has been to serve the people in a way that is respectful of their values, developmental from their point of view and empowering to those citizens desirous of strengthening their family and communal life. Within the confines of this space, time, budget and directive my experience with telecommunications has been limited to two black and white portapaks and one 3650 Sony editing deck. I would like to share with you a number of the more valuable new experiences that have resulted, and then leave it to you to imagine how much further we could have gone.

1. Health education series. Vanderbilt medical students initiated an educational series to be played in the waiting room of the local primary care health centers. The subject matter was common illnesses. The teaching method employed some visuals, some input from professional staff and maximum input from local people who were sick. The idea was

that hearing the lesson from familiar people would help demythologize both sicknesses and cures.

2. Coal mining. Video tapes were exchanged for better understanding various aspects of the coal mining business. There was an exchange on union organizing between Kentucky and England, and of strip mining between Tennessee and Germany. These tapes showed differences in reclamation and difference in ownership of land. Also tapes on community life of coal mining towns in Whales and West Virginia were exchanged.

3. Organizing. There have been video exchanges between Blacks in West Tennessee and Whites in East Tennessee. The tapes identify certain similar economic problems and the differences in the social, political, racial and ethnic identities of each community.

4. Dialogue between people and government. Video tapes from Tanzania show how the president of the country is informed about how people feel about developments in their rural communities. The conflict between professional and grass roots opinion spoke to different value levels, different world experiences, different hopes for the local community.

5. History. Tapes were made by teenagers collecting an oral history of the community which made the past alive in a new way for the old and the young.

6. Playback of activities such as slow learners making pottery and storytellers entertaining the young and old, provided some identity, reinforcement and consciousness of meaningful relationships, which provided a positive experience.

7. Values. Tapes of people reflecting on land use were useful to groups such as the local community development corporation. From these tapes we were able to draw out predominant values of land such as land for holding, for economic gain, for survival, for security, for aesthetics.

Obviously for people who have almost no access to books, make little use of newspapers, travel within a very limited circle of people, such exposure through video is very enriching for them and most developmental for the community.

Thoughts About What Could Be

Model Valley has provided some opportunity as well to talk about things that could be done that would be appropriate for that community.

1. Using a system to monitor business and recreation and public facilities at night to protect them against vandalism. Right now night watchmen are payed and sometimes the cost of this makes the difference in not starting something that might otherwise be possible within the community. This holds more true for the recreational and educational facilities.

2. Another need particularly felt in areas with limited telephone facilities, is some way to alert people of emergencies like theft, sickness, fire, flood, car wreck.

3. Television could promote recreational and educational programs that are designed to bring people together. Rural areas quite often have no public facility and people remain very isolated. Rather than develop any form of communication that would promote isolation, could programs not be geared for some family gathering or to create the need for calling in neighbors. How much more fun it would be if the group could get immediate feedback.

4. Rural people are by-in-large family oriented. All educators know the results of an educational program in the school that is counter-productive because of opposite things being taught through the family living situation. Could educational materials not be designed specifically for the whole family? In areas like Model Valley where over half the highschool aged children do not attend school, such a program, if effective, could provide a third alternative to the present choices between a daily three hour trip on the school bus or dropping out.

Communications could enhance and promote a value system and encourage practical ways of living out that value system. Communications could heighten ones competency in dealing with how to conserve heat, how to grow ones food, how to identify birds and plants, how to develop co-operative skills, how to write. There is much that can speak to rural life and the values found in that choice of life style. The 'simple life' that more and more urban dwellers are wanting is, in part, indicative of their need to come in first-hand contact with primary sources upon which their needs are satisfied. Rural values, expressed out of people's real experience, can have much to offer the nation as a whole. With the right start we might even get some national television that

will express values other than those coming from New York and San Francisco.

A Word About Development

One word that needs to be examined from a rural perspective is the word development. Developments get their biggest plus in the cities when they bring better prices and greater choices. The positive aspects of developments in a rural area are making things accessible and personal. These positive aspects of rural developments to the poor become even more significant. Quite often the poor don't have available transportation to get to the city that has cheaper prices and greater choices. The fact that the food, health service, garage, whatever in a community can be gotten to, makes rural priorities relevant and urban priorities irrelevant from a minority perspective. The personal closeness found in the rural society has many rewards. A friend to talk to, a feeling of acceptance, a person from whom to learn, a person you can trust (this is the required credential for acceptance in a rural society), a person to barter and exchange with - these are all critical to life and very personalized activities. There are reasons to aspire to urban definitions of developments, but one must be careful about the degree to which one aspires to these things in specific communities. We have within rural America, areas which are chronically poor. Areas that are primarily involved in extracting from the soil or ground the foods and minerals needed to give energy to the rest of society, will probably remain poor as long as our nation continues in its present system and life style. Things might get worse...things might get better. Either way it will be a long haul, and many generations will come and go in the gradual process of change. Hence in the development of communications technology it is important to have the technical and financial competency to deliver the good to such communities so that they might use communications as the prime mover towards fulfilling their definition of development.

The Appropriate People

A minority perspective of what needs to be done to meet the needs of the rural poor is not expected to be a priority on anyone's agenda. But priorities should not be worked out in isolation from the needs of the poor. There must be room for exceptions within any action model. There must be reasons for the exceptions that are understandable.

There must be specific advantages to the whole society for making exceptions to a particular group within that society. For too long are country has ignored the realities of a sub-culture and its sub-system. Every day the poor become more and more 'out of it'. Every day there are more and more poor. The differences in the governments and economic systems of third world countries are recognizable. Regions of our country which suffer from chronic poverty are in no-mans land. This need not remain the case, and the potential for making a real breakthrough within the communications field is about the most exciting thing that I have thought about for a long time.